

# Think About It: Socrates Café at the DFL

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## WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

Tuesdays, 3 – 4 p.m., to “discuss the big questions of Life: how do we know what is Real? What makes us who we are?” Then on Wednesdays, 3 – 4 p.m., the High School Book Group meets, billed as “part book discussion, part

Socrates Café, we spend some time reviewing cool stuff we have recently read. Then we launch into open-ended discussions about existential issues that occur to us through our lives and the books we read.”

Both groups have elements of Socrates Café, an informal, if disciplined, format for returning the practice of philosophical inquiry to the lives of ordinary people in a way that reopens the big, universal questions and allows people to share ideas with the help of discourse with others, or

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Years ago Ellen Snoeyenbos gave me a book, “Socrates Café,” by Christopher Philips. I’m pretty sure she had a box full of them, so I could keep it. I still have it, if she needs it back. I haven’t finished it yet. Ellen runs the Young Adult programs at the Duxbury Free Library. Working from the guidelines in the book, Ellen started the P.H.I.L.S. Club (People Having Interesting Lives Simultaneously) at the library, a middle school-aged group that meets

more likely, to find better and more difficult questions – but that's when it really gets interesting. Both groups run their own agendas regarding reading selections.

They are, of course, not courses. It's the Library, the home of reading for pleasure and being challenged, not graded. These are philosophy clubs. They do this for fun. I suspect that the hour flies by like a time warp, driven by the curve thrown into space-time when highly charged consciousness engages.

Oops. That's my imagination. This happens to me lately when I think or learn about philosophy. My imagination begins to fly. It all started years ago when Ellen pointed me to "Endymion Spring," a book by Matthew Skelton. The story won a golden seal of approval from Ellen's Book Marks book club.

I am unafraid of young adult literature, like J.K.

Rowling's "Harry Potter" or Philip Pullman's "Golden Compass." Pullman, in particular, sparked my interest in Oxford, England and its ancient University, where, according to Pullman, "... the real and the unreal jostle in the streets... where windows open into other worlds."

Now Pullman is an outspoken, nearly evangelical atheist, rather like (from the little I've read about him) Richard Dawkins, who, like Pullman, is an Oxford guy, an Emeritus Fellow at New College, Oxford. You know, the new one, founded in 1379 by William of Wykeham. Pullman is a middle school English teacher, and Dawkins is a biologist. Nevertheless, Dawkins wrote the runaway best seller, "The God Delusion," but has taken some heat from at least one (my learning is growing) philosopher, Marianne Talbot, Director of Studies in Philosophy for Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education. I've only just begun to unpack her criticism, but it looks like she's about to carve up part of his argument with

cutlery forged in symbolic logic and critical thinking, the philosopher's philosophy tools. You can hear her lectures for free, as I do, through iTunes U on your computer – just click on Oxford University and follow your philosophical nose.

And if you're the right age for Ellen's Socrates Café-style groups after school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, you can join in the exhilaration of pondering and discussing life's fundamental questions. Can we know that there is a god? Can we know that there isn't a god? What do we mean by "know?" Is it metaphysical certainty, or just pretty-darned-sureness? Or is it sweeping conviction and wonder all rolled into one experience of the Real? How can we ponder well? What do we mean by "reality?" What do we mean by "what do we mean?"

I know. It can get mind-boggling, but it's worth it.